

THE AFTERLIFE OF ANCIENT EMPIRES

Edited by Ahuvia Kahane and Chiara Thumiger.

This multi-author book studies the reception of ancient empires in contemporary culture. Empires mark key moments in history and bring the relationship between individual and state into sharp relief. The idea of ‘empire’ thus offers important perspectives for exploring the history of political culture and for studying basic questions of power and resistance, sovereignty and territory, individual and collective. The empires of classical antiquity in particular have played an important role in the imagination, thought, literature, and political practice of modern societies. Having fallen into decline, ancient empires continued to function as reference points for almost all forms of political organization in the West and as key terms in the study of empires worldwide. We might thus say that empires of the past, and classical empires especially, have an existence in more than one time and culture, and form part of a complex amalgam of past, present, and future. This process is, in fact, evidenced throughout history. The Persian empire, for example, provided a contrastive backdrop for Athenian identities; the Athenian empire formed a substrate for Alexander's empire; Egypt and the Hellenistic kingdoms were built on the ruins of the Macedonian empire; on top of these, the Roman empire rose, and from its ashes many a modern state emerged. Such historical imbrication continues in the empires of the modern era. Whether ‘empire’ as a practical form of political organization has now died out (as Hobsbawm and others argue) or is very much alive (as Hardt and Negri, Agamben, Gregory, Harvey and others suggest), the idea of empire forms an inseparable part of our understanding of the political present writ large, just as the present writ large cannot be excluded from our understanding of the empires of antiquity. It is further important to note that this claim provides a vivid illustration of the fundamental tenants of reception: a text, or an historical phenomenon, such as ‘empire’ is not a reified entity. Its meaning does not reside in ‘the thing *in itself*’ as an isolated object, but is constructed through many contingent acts of reading, and it incorporates contemporary perspectives as well as the perspectives of past centuries.

The present volume brings together essays that explore key relations between the ideas, images, and practices of antiquity and the contemporary world. The book illustrates the importance of these relations for the understanding of our presents.